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One January, two men began a four-day trek across a mountain range. The weather forecast when they left was alarming, and, by midnight the first day, the temperature had dropped to minus 10 F. By the next morning, it had fallen to minus 23 F.

On the second day, one man's physical condition started failing. Instead of retreating to shelter below the timberline, however, the two pushed on until the sick partner collapsed from hypothermia and exhaus-



tion. The other left his ailing partner wrapped in a sleeping bag and bivvy sack and went for help.

Suffering from severe frostbite, he found help around 9 o'clock that night, but his and their efforts were in vain. Rescuers pulled his partner's frozen body off the mountain in a sled the following day.

Granted, most people wouldn't head for the backcountry in those conditions. However, it's important to understand that weather in the backcountry can change quickly—anytime of year. I once was hiking near Mt. Baker, Wash., when I decided to take a break. At the time, it was 85 degrees. Before I could get my stove started for lunch, the sky clouded over, and it started to snow. This change took only 15 minutes.

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Mountains make their own weather by forcing incoming air masses upward as they strike the mountains. As the air rises, it cools at an average rate of 3.5 degrees Fahrenheit per 1,000 feet, forming clouds and increasing precipitation. On the leeward side of mountains, the air descends down slope, warms, and increases the amount of water vapor it can hold. This leeward side receives less precipitation, in what is called a "rain shadow."

Because of the changeable weather conditions in the mountains, you need to take along the 10 essentials when you head toward the backcountry for some hiking, camping, fishing, or hunting. These essentials include extra clothing, extra food, matches and fire starter, map, compass, whistle, first-aid kit, sleeping bag, something to purify water, and a tarp.

You might be wondering, "Why do I need all this gear?" The truth is, most of it will stay in your pack. You never know, though, when you'll need some of the equipment. I was glad I had the extra clothing I usually take for snowboarding that day while hiking near Mt. Baker.

Most of the essential items are self-explanatory. However, you might be questioning the "fire starter," especially when I list matches. You may need a candle, some dry moss you found last trip, or anything that will keep burning long enough to light some wood. That annoying whistle belonging to your kids or younger brother can be heard much farther than your voice. And, the sleeping bag and tarp may serve many purposes. If you have to spend the night, you can use the tarp for shelter and stay warm in the sleeping bag. Another use—one I hope I never have—is to keep an injured person warm and dry. The tarp also could be used to patch a hole in a backpack.

Earlier, I referred to the 10 essentials, but I suggest you consider an 11th one: a buddy. Don't go hiking alone.

If you have all these items, just remember to stop by the local ranger station and pick up a pass before heading into the backcountry. These passes are required for most of the trailheads in the Snoqualmie-Baker National Forest and other hiking areas. The fine for not having the pass isn't something you want to pay. While you're at the ranger station, ask about the weather conditions in the area where you'll be going. ■